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News Release



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(SC)

04-126

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For Release: December 14, 2004

CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR COACHELLA VALLEY MILK-VETCH

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published today a proposed rule to designate critical habitat for the federally endangered *Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *coachellae* (Coachella Valley milk-vetch) on 3,583 acres of land in Riverside County, California.

The range of Coachella Valley milk-vetch is limited to the area from just east of Cabazon to north and west of Indio with additional limited occurrences in the Chuckwalla Valley along a 5-mile stretch of Highway 177 north of Desert Center.

Within its geographic range, Coachella Valley milk-vetch is found in loose, wind-blown (eolian) or alluvial sands located on dunes or flats, and along disturbed margins of sandy washes. Areas proposed as critical habitat for Coachella Valley milk-vetch contain essential habitat components for the plant, including lands containing suitable habitat which support populations of the plant and its seed bank.

“Development of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan is progressing,” said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service’s California/Nevada Operations Office. “Consistent with the Service’s support for regional conservation planning efforts, we are excluding from our proposal the essential habitat for Coachella Valley milk-vetch identified in the preferred alternative of the Plan.”

There are three elements to the habitat needs of Coachella Valley milk-vetch. Sands that originate in the drainage basins of the San Bernardino, Little San Bernardino, San Jacinto mountains, and Indio Hills are transported by wind and water to areas where the plants are found. The sands must pass through intervening areas not occupied by the plant. The Service is proposing the important areas occupied by the plants as critical habitat.

The Service has identified and proposed for exclusion, based on the draft MSHCP, the corridors through which the sands are generally transported through the intervening areas to areas proposed as critical habitat, and is requesting public comment on whether the sand source

areas in the mountains face a degree of threat which would warrant their inclusion in a final critical habitat designation.

More than 80 percent of the land proposed as critical habitat is federally managed, including portions of the drainages that lie within the boundaries of the Service's Coachella Valley National Wildlife Refuge; and areas that support populations of the plant and its sand habitat that are managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Areas proposed as critical habitat are identified in three separate units – Whitewater River System, Mission Creek/Morongo Wash Systems, and Thousand Palms System - each of which contains habitat components essential to the plant's conservation, including sand from transport corridors, sandy alluvial washes and sand deposition sites.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

This critical habitat proposal was completed in response to lawsuits filed by the California Native Plant Society, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Building Industry Legal Defense Foundation.

Public comment on the proposed rule will be accepted until February 14, 2005 and can be submitted in writing to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009. Comments may also be faxed to 760-431-9618, or sent by e-mail to **fw1cfwocvmv@fws.gov**.

Requests for a public hearing will be accepted until January 28, 2005.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about Coachella Valley milk-vetch can be accessed on the Internet at <http://carslabd.fws.gov>, or by contacting the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760-431-9440.

The proposed rule was published today in the *Federal Register*.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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